



Doing What Works

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Presentation

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Teaching Academic English to English Learners

April 2007

Topic: Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English Learners

Practice: Develop Academic English

Highlights

- Definition of a reading intervention as an intensive teaching approach that offers extra support to students.
- Description of the characteristics of effective reading interventions.
- What Works Clearinghouse contains reviews of programs showing positive results with English language learners.
- Tips for supporting reading interventions including school-wide collaboration, professional development and teacher collaboration
- Big idea: Don't wait to provide reading interventions to English learners—whatever their level of English language proficiency.

Full Transcript

Slide #1

Teaching Academic English to English Learners

Slide #2

"Here are a few tips before we get started..."

- Use the slide titles in the "outline" to jump to a specific section.
- Click on the "script" tab to follow along with the narration.
- Use the controls at the bottom to easily stop and start the presentation.
- And download any related files in the "attachments" folder.

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This is Martin. He's a typical student: he laughs, plays, and likes talking with his classmates.

But when it comes to his schoolwork, Martin is sometimes lost.

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It's not that Martin can't communicate with his friends and teachers—he can speak English pretty well.

It's that Martin doesn't understand **academic English**—the language used in his math, science, and social studies classes and textbooks—the language his teachers speak and in which he is tested.

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Martin is not alone. He's one of approximately 4.5 million English learners in US schools today.

For these students, learning academic English is not an option—it's critical for their comprehension of textbooks and lessons in EVERY subject area; and critical to their success in school, college, and the workforce.

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Luckily, Martin and his fellow English learners are smart kids, and they're eager to learn. They just need the right instruction.

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While students can learn conversational English informally, academic English must be taught explicitly—it requires a high degree of precision and simply will not be picked up in everyday conversation.

English learners who are not exposed to academic English in their homes or at school NEVER acquire it.

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Academic English is not simply vocabulary, it's also grammar—and English learners must know BOTH in order to complete academic tasks.

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Academic English is also about listening, reading, and writing. Students who aren't familiar with academic English in all three of these areas have a hard time being engaged in classroom activities—and a hard time staying motivated to do well in school.

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The challenge for teachers is how to teach English learners BOTH academic English and subject matter content at the same time.

Experts suggest that a good starting point is to teach academic language in short lessons throughout the day.

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Subject area instruction is where students encounter and practice new words through explanations and activities. And, in these subjects, English learners need explicit instruction in academic English.

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Think back to how you solved “word problems” during math. The word problem included **both** common words and words used specifically in mathematics—so you needed to know both.

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And you were doing two things at once:

First, you were using the order of words and grammatical structures to understand the problem.

Then you had to use math skills to solve the problem.

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It’s a complicated task that a lot of educated adult English speakers take for granted. For them, it’s easy—they’ve spent their academic careers mastering academic language. For young students, however, there’s a lot to learn along the way. And English learners need more help than others.

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So, when is the best time to teach academic English? Is it:

- During content area instruction?
- During ESL classes?-Or as part of the core reading program?

The answer is ALL OF THE ABOVE. Experts believe English language instruction that occurs throughout the day provides the best opportunities for learning academic English.

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Let’s look at these one at time, starting with content area instruction during the regular class day. Here are a few strategies for teaching subject-matter content to English learners:

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1. BE EXPLICIT

As we saw in the math word problem, comprehension of academic concepts depends on understanding particular words and language structures. Being explicit and intentional will benefit all students, especially English learners.

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2. USE "SHELTERED" INSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES

That is, use teaching strategies that make the subject matter comprehensible to English learners. Some techniques include: building background knowledge, using visuals and gestures, and providing extra practice in applying new skills.

The SIOP Model has useful advice about ways to address language and content objectives from state standards. See the SIOP website for more information.

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3. USE APPROPRIATE GRADE-LEVEL TEXTS

Experts do NOT recommend using simplified texts with English learners. Instead, it's better to use grade level texts with sheltered teaching strategies to familiarize students with the content. Once a text is familiar, it can be used as the basis of English language development.

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We've addressed some effective ways to incorporate academic English in content area instruction, but what about in English as Second Language, or ESL, classrooms?

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In many ways, this is a perfect place for academic English instruction. ESL teachers should:

1. DIRECTLY SUPPORT CONTENT LEARNING by previewing material that will be taught in science or social studies, clarifying instructional tasks, and providing additional practice with academic language that's already been taught.

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2. MODEL AND EXPLICITLY TEACH THE PROPER USE OF ENGLISH

This includes using words in context, words with multiple meanings, word structure, word order, and tense.

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3. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS TO PRACTICE their English, and correct errors when appropriate. In particular, experts recommend correcting errors in the context of that day's lesson.

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There's one more part of the day when academic English should be taught—during the Core Reading Program.

Teachers responsible for the Core Reading Program are naturals for teaching academic English.

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For example, during reading class students may learn how to “compare and contrast”—an academic skill that's useful in many other content areas.

To assist English learners with this skill, the Core Reading teacher could highlight words and phrases used when comparing and contrasting—such as “alike”, “same”, “different”, and “on the other hand”. They could also show students how to use venn diagrams or charts to visually organize the information being compared and contrasted.

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Doing this should not detract from regular reading instruction; rather, it provides a little extra practice and reinforcement for English learners or other students who need help in learning academic English.

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When students learn academic English in all three settings—during Content Area instruction, in ESL class, and in the Core Reading Program—these methods reinforce each other and English learners benefit.

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So how can a school implement a strong academic English program? Here are a few steps to get you started:

1. CARVE OUT AND PROTECT TIME in the daily schedule to teach academic English every day.

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2. ADOPT OR CREATE A CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK for teaching proper language usage. Frameworks that list relevant topics in teaching academic English—state standards, for example—are a good starting point for guidance about what to teach.

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3. ORGANIZE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT for subject matter teachers, reading teachers, and ESL staff—so they can work together and share their approaches. Follow this with weekly planning time to facilitate collaboration on academic English lessons.

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Implementing academic English instruction in ALL classrooms can be complex. But taken step-by-step, these methods can be effectively incorporated into ANY classroom or school.

Remember, these steps lead to higher achievement for ALL students, not just English learners.

And when you teach students academic English, you're not only making them better readers—you're giving students skills that will last a lifetime.

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To learn more about academic English, see the additional resources on this website.